

SURINAME 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and both the constitution and the penal code prohibit discrimination based on religion. Any violation may be brought before a court of justice. Religious groups seeking financial support from the government are required to register with the Ministry of Home Affairs. Limited financial support is available, primarily as a stipend for clergy. The government subsidizes schools managed by religious organizations, providing a fee per registered student and the salaries of teachers. On October 27, the government reiterated its strong support for religious freedom and encouraged religious organizations to develop equitable values and norms in society during a workshop in honor of the International Day of Religious Freedom.

The Inter-Religious Council (IRIS), an organization of the country's different religious groups, including two Hindu groups, two Muslim groups, the Jewish community, and the Catholic Church, continued to meet monthly to discuss planned interfaith activities and positions on government policies. Throughout the year, the IRIS made public statements on societal issues, including expressing support for freedom of religious practices and encouraging mutual respect among religious groups.

Embassy representatives met with a government official from the Ministry of Home Affairs' Religious Organizations Office during the October 27th International Day of Religious Freedom roundtable. Embassy representatives also met with senior government officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At these meetings, the officials reiterated the government's commitment to tolerance and pluralism. Embassy officials met with members of the Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian communities to discuss how the different organizations promoted respect for religious diversity within their communities. Embassy officials hosted a religious roundtable discussion in January to discuss the current status and a historical perspective on religious freedom and tolerance in the country. In October the embassy hosted a workshop in honor of the International Day of Religious Freedom. Embassy representatives emphasized U.S. government policy on promoting religious freedom and respect for religious diversity worldwide.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 592,000 (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2012 census, the most recent available, 48 percent of the population is Christian, of which 22 percent is Roman Catholic. Other Christian groups include Moravian, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, evangelical Protestant, Baptist, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Hindus are 22 percent of the population, including the Sanathan Dharm and the Arya Dewaker. Muslims, including Sunni and Ahmadi Muslims and the World Islamic Call Society, are 14 percent. The remaining 13 percent includes Bahais, Jews, Buddhists, Brahma Kumaris, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and three Rastafarian organizations: the Aya Bingi Order, 12th Tribe, and Bobo Shanti.

Some Amerindian and Maroon populations, approximately 3 percent of the population, adhere to indigenous religions. Certain Amerindian groups, concentrated principally in the interior and to a lesser extent in coastal areas, practice shamanism through a medicine man (*piaiman*). Many Maroons worship nature. Those of Amerindian and Maroon origin who identify as Christian often combine Christian practices with indigenous religious customs. Additionally, some Creoles in urban areas worship their ancestors through a rite called *wintie*.

There is some correlation between ethnicity and religion. The Hindustani-speaking population is primarily Hindu, while some ethnic Indians, Javanese, and Creoles practice Islam. Christianity crosses all ethnic backgrounds.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states that everyone has freedom of religion, and individuals may not be discriminated against on the grounds of religion. Individuals may choose to change their religion. Any violation may be brought before a court of justice.

The penal code provides punishment for those who instigate hate or discrimination of persons based on religion or creed in any way; however, the law has not been applied. Those found guilty may be sentenced to a prison term of no longer than one year and a fine of up to 25,000 Surinamese dollars (SRD) (\$3,300). In cases where an insult or act of hatred is instigated by more than one person, as part of an organization, or by a person who makes such statements habitually or as part of work, the punishment can include imprisonment of up to two years and fines of up to SRD 50,000 (\$6,600).

Religious groups are required to register with the Ministry of Home Affairs only if they seek financial support, including stipends for clergy, from the government. To register, religious groups must supply contact information, a history of their group, and addresses for houses of worship. Most religious groups are officially registered.

The law does not permit religious instruction in public schools. The government funds teacher salaries and provides a stipend that partially covers maintenance costs to all elementary and secondary schools established and managed by various religious groups. Religious groups are required to provide the remaining funding, which includes construction costs, funding for school furniture, supplies, and additional maintenance expenses. Approximately 50 percent of primary and secondary schools in the country are managed by religious organizations. The Roman Catholic diocese, Moravian Church, and Hindu community manage the majority of private schools. Through the Ministries of Education and Finance, the government provides a fee per registered child and pays teacher salaries to the religious organizations managing these schools.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government continued to emphasize in government-hosted events and in the media its commitment to protecting religious freedom, including of religious minorities, and to fostering respect for religious diversity and promoting tolerance. Government officials attended events hosted by religious organizations to emphasize its support.

Schools, including public schools, celebrated various religious holidays that are also national holidays, including Christmas, Easter, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, Diwali, and Phagwa, but the government continued to ban public schools from allowing prayer groups during breaks. Schools managed by religious groups included religious instruction in the curriculum. All students attending schools run by religious groups were required to take part in religious instruction, regardless of their religious background. Parents were not permitted to homeschool children for religious reasons.

The armed forces maintained a staff chaplaincy with Hindu, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic clergy available to military personnel.

On October 27, the government reiterated its strong support for religious freedom and underscored the importance of religious organizations in developing equitable societal values and norms during a workshop in honor of the International Day of Religious Freedom.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

IRIS continued its efforts to promote respect for religious diversity and freedom in the country. Although non-Catholic Christian groups were not IRIS members, the council consulted them on the possible impact of a verdict in a trial of President Bouterse for his alleged involvement in the killings of 15 political opponents in 1982 that remained in progress at the end of the year. Different religious groups supported a proposal from the Catholic Church to establish a platform for reconciliation regarding the president's trial, with the assistance of the Holy See and the Organization of American States. The council met monthly to discuss planned interfaith activities and positions on government policies, such as the draft National Development Plan and legislation impacting social welfare. Government officials continued to consult with the council, recognizing it as a social partner and seeking its advice on how these proposed laws could impact society. The IRIS chairman emphasized on several occasions the council's support for freedom of religious practice and encouraged mutual respect among all religious groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives met with an official from the Ministry of Home Affairs' Religious Organizations Office during the October 27th International Day of Religious Freedom roundtable. Embassy representatives also met with senior government officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At these meetings, the officials reiterated the government's commitment to tolerance and pluralism, in response to embassy representatives raising the importance of government protection of religious freedom for all groups regardless of religious affiliation.

Embassy officials met with members of the Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian communities to discuss promotion of respect for religious diversity.

The embassy hosted a roundtable discussion in January to discuss the current status and a historical perspective on religious freedom and tolerance in the country. Participants included representatives from the Catholic Church, Suriname Islamic Organization, Moravian Church, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Arya

Dewaker, and Commission on World Prayer Day – the organizing body of an international prayer event the country was selected to host in March 2018. In October the embassy hosted a workshop in honor of the International Day of Religious Freedom. Embassy representatives emphasized U.S. government policy on advancing religious freedom and respect for religious diversity worldwide.